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With a Social and Meliorist Goal in the Urban Space and at Sea

Bukdahl, Else Marie

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New Visual Dialogues and New Art Projects

with a Social and Meliorist Goal in the Urban Space and at Sea

Else Marie Bukdahl⁺ (Denmark)

“A work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art.” – Cézanne

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the relationship between Richard Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics and several art projects by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Marit Benthe Norheim and SUPERFLEX. A core element in Shusterman's aesthetics is that the bodily and mental dimensions of human beings are inseparable. He has also changed philosophy in such a way as to make it better serve human life. These three visualize basic elements of Shusterman's aesthetics, particularly with regard to embodied creation and perception, the interactive dialogue with the viewer and the surroundings, the unification of art and experience as well as the hope of being able to benefit life.

Keywords: *Pragmatist Aesthetics, Art and Experience, Community, Holism, Meliorism, Pluralism*

⁺ Else Marie Bukdahl, D. Phil., Honorary Professor at the Department of Art and Technology, Aalborg University, Denmark, and former Rector of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Puggaardsgade 10, 1 tv, 1573 Copenhagen V, Denmark. voice: +45 3312-5045. email: mail@em-bukdahl.dk.

Introduction

The prominent American philosopher and aesthetician Richard Shusterman has interpreted the currently very influential pragmatist aesthetics in an original and inspired way. He later developed this interpretation into a new interdisciplinary field of studies called “somaesthetics,” in which the central concept is that it is “the living body - a sentient soma” he is referring to and not “a mere mechanical corpse.”¹ The word “soma” comes from the Greek - meaning “body.”

The notion of holism is central to his somaesthetics and his aesthetics. It is “an orientation toward seeing things in terms of continuities rather than dualisms. We have already noted continuities between body and mind, nature and culture, theory and practice. But the continuities of common sense and scientific inquiry, science and art, thought and feeling, ethics and aesthetics are also salient in pragmatism.”²

Shusterman’s aesthetics are – as he often remarks himself – also inspired by the philosophy and religion of the East – including the Zen Buddhist notions of the union of the body and the mind, mindfulness and the body-mind awareness. Zen Buddhism contains elements that appear in an entirely new arena in his own aesthetics. He expresses this view as follows:

“Zen Buddhist-style notions of art and religious practice offer a religion of immanence with no transcendental, personal God existing outside the world of creation; no eternal, personal, immaterial soul existing apart from its embodied manifestations; and no sacred world (an art world or heaven) existing beyond the world of experienced flux.”³

He has always focused on social practice and political experimentation, emphasizing that truth must be relative to specific social contexts and practices. He is also convinced that philosophy can and must solve practical and social problems. Realizing this goal has always been a leitmotif in the development of his pragmatist aesthetics.⁴

“Pluralism” is another keyword in his pragmatism because it points to openness and the sense that our world is in a continuous process of change, which ensures that unilateral approaches are always sidelined in favour of a multiplicity of “access routes.”⁵

A very central concept in Shusterman’s philosophy and aesthetics is art interpreted as experience.⁶ Shusterman has a vital focus on lived experience and its influence on self-knowledge. The aesthetic experience is never passive, thus an artwork is never complete until the viewer has experienced and interpreted its particular qualities. This is why there is always an intense interplay between the artwork and the viewer and the viewing experience.⁷ Shusterman is convinced that experience is always closely connected to experimentation and also builds on the interaction between tradition and innovation.⁸

Shusterman highlights “the immediate non-discursive,” non-linguistic experience as a very valuable source of experience and an epistemological foundation.⁹

Thus, when he interprets “art as experience,” it means that both the artist and the person experiencing the works operate in an open space with a great deal of visibility and freedom. Last, but not least, an important “key and distinctive pragmatist orientation is the meliorist goal of making things better, deconstructing or circumventing various obstacles and opening thought and life to new and promising options.”¹⁰

This is why he always focuses on what he calls “the critical, ameliorative study of one’s experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation and creative self-fashioning.”¹¹

In both philosophy and art, Shusterman always aims for the realization of “the aesthetic experience of collaborative creation, and even the cognitive gains from exploring new practices that provoke new sensations, spur new energies and attitudes, and thus probe one’s current limits and perhaps transcend them to transform the self.”¹²

Shusterman’s somaesthetics, which contains three keywords: Soma, Self and Society, are - as he has remarked - “a natural extension of my work in pragmatist aesthetics. Bringing aesthetics closer to the realm of life and practice, I realized, entails bringing the body more centrally into aesthetic focus, since all life and practice - all perception, cognition and action - is crucially performed through the body.”¹³

His own concise definition of this discipline is as follows:

“Somaesthetics offers a way of integrating the discursive and nondiscursive, the reflective and the immediate, thought and feeling, in the quest of providing greater range, harmony, and clarity to the soma – the body-mind whose union is an ontological given but whose most satisfying unities of performance are both a personal and cultural achievement.”¹⁴

Somaesthetics is thus both “a specific field of studies and methodic physical exercises,” which Shusterman - with his novel approach - has made a “sub-discipline of philosophy.” Its scope is clear in Shusterman’s definition of its three primary areas - where theory and practice are closely integrated:

1. Analytic somaesthetics “describes the basic nature of our bodily perceptions and practices and their function in our knowledge and construction of reality.”
2. Pragmatic somaesthetics has a “distinctly normative, prescriptive character - by proposing specific methods of somatic improvement and engaging in their comparative critique.”¹⁵
3. Practical somaesthetics - “which gets philosophers to get up from their arm-chairs and actually perform the somatic techniques they write about (...) they should not limit themselves to “textualizing the body” but engage in “concrete body work” too.”¹⁶

Shusterman points out that somaesthetics can also illuminate artistic expressions of rupture, abjection and disgust, which form a significant part of contemporary visual art.”¹⁷ He thus draws a whole range of important artistic expressions into aesthetics, which also have a very important place in the art of our era.

Shusterman blames contemporary aesthetics for being too intellectual, “emphasizing art as a symbol system or an object of mere cognitive interpretation, rather than an object of deeply felt experience.” Art has become remote and esoteric for the great mass of people. He is convinced that “this stress on the power and value of aesthetic experience is (...) very important for the contemporary art world which seems to be losing its appeal for the general public because of its failure to create powerful aesthetic experience.”¹⁸

It is obvious that Shusterman has succeeded in given somaesthetics an activist role in rethinking and reshaping art.

The Relation Between Somaesthetics and Visual Art

I will focus on a series of projects created by four artists whose works, in different ways, contain visualizations of the basic themes in Shusterman’s somaesthetics. Their projects are based on various artistic strategies and forms of technology, which seek, from a series of perspectives, to improve the quality of life of the individual or society’s aesthetic values whilst also addressing environmental objectives. It is also about works that draw us out of the fixed framework of everyday life and provide space for new experiences and insights and thus have a liberating function. It is especially work that have a strong power of expression what Richard Shusterman calls “a powerful appeal.” Finally, I will highlight works, which in a series of surprising and unexpected ways, establish new connections between art and architecture and are thus able to create new orientations and new perspectives in our daily life. But these artworks also visualize major elements of Richard Shusterman’s somaesthetics, in much the same way as his aesthetics can clarify important aspects in the artworks and place them in a new and promising context.

The prominent Thai artist, *Rirkrit Tiravanija*, has presented surprising installations in Thailand, Europe and particularly in his country of residence, the U.S.A. His installations often take the form of stages or rooms for sharing meals, cooking, reading and playing music. The architecture or other structures he uses always form the framework for a variety of social events. Such as in, for example, the installation *Untitled (Free)* which Tiravanija first created in 1992 in the 303 Gallery in New York (figure 1) and was later shown in other versions in a variety of galleries and museums like MoMA. He has described this installation in the following inspiring way:

“So when you first walk in, what you see is a kind of haphazard storage space. But as you approached this you could start to smell the jasmine rice. That kind of draws you through to the office space. And in this place I made two pots of curries, green curries. One was made how Thai restaurants in New York were making it. To counter that, on the other pot was an authen-

tically made Thai curry. I was working on the idea of food, but in a kind of anthropological and archaeological way. It was a lot about the layers of taste and, otherness.”¹⁹



Figure 1. An untitled installation by Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija known as “Free” 1992, New York. Provided by the Tiravanija Studio.



Figure 2. Discussions in the Schindler House featuring a mirrored floor installation by Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. Provided by the Tiravanija Studio.

Tiravanija’s work is fundamentally about bringing people together, thereby creating a better world. His exhibitions are often created through surprising interactions and exchanges amongst participants. He has emphasized repeatedly that “it is not what you see that is important but what takes place between people.”²⁰

In his installations he successfully attempts to bridge a mind-body gap that often exists in Western art. This is precisely what Shusterman has been doing in his somaesthetic theory and practice. Tiravanija also realised this artistic aim in a very impressive way in the project he developed for the Secession in Vienna (2002) where he took Rudolf Schindler's Kings Road House in Los Angeles as his conceptual starting point. (figure 2) His project is based both on this House and the visions behind it. Those visions are significant not only for architecture, but also for art and the breaking down of the false barrier between art and action that often, in the words of Richard Shusterman, "trivializes art and robs its power of positive praxis. For art's highest aim is not to make a few admirable objects in a world filled with misery, but to create a better world through the work such objects can generate."²¹ Rirkrit Tiravanija created a reconstruction of the studio tract of the so-called Schindler House in the main room of the Secession and used this as the venue for various activities that provided the exhibition guests with new inspiration and revealed new layers of meaning in our daily life. Therefore "Tiravanija's interest focuses less on a faithful architectural facsimile than on 'animating' Rudolf Schindler's world of ideas, his concept of inside and outside in relation to the conditions of private and public spaces. To this Tiravanija adds his own ideas on relationships and communities, his characteristic conception of art as an investigation and implementation of "living well." Throughout the duration of the exhibition, the installation will be used as a venue for a multimedia program offered by Tiravanija and various guests, with features such as film screenings, concerts, presentations and lectures."²² Time to eat wonderful Thai meals is also part of the activities in the reconstructed Schindler House.

Tiravanija is very fond of Schindler's House in Los Angeles, which was built in 1922. In this house Schindler did not use the static "traditional architectonic patterns." Instead he preferred to work with flowing spatial structures, which allow many new forms of spontaneous social life. In the house there are also interactions between the inside and outside which make new forms of communication possible. And it is precisely these social aspects that Tiravanija intensifies and "animates" through his various activities, which are able to create new relationships between people and to break down barriers between societal groups and conventional ways of thinking. It is precisely this liberating process that is one of the main themes in Shusterman's somaesthetics and which Tiravanija interprets in many surprising and artistic ways in his installations.

Marit Benthe Norheim, who is a Danish and Norwegian artist, is first and foremost a sculptor. She has, in an exemplary and contemporary manner, created an array of sculptures in public spaces in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, England, Iceland and Greenland. She has managed to create unique sculptures, which establish unexpected visual dialogues with their surroundings. They lend the locations where they are situated a new identity and establish new patterns of meaning. The dialogues with the surroundings, which are created by her sculptures are so nuanced and intense that meaning, form and materials are always closely aligned in relation to their locations. She has succeeded in activating the public space. Like Shusterman, she is focusing on how art "can serve individual, social and political

reconstruction” and support “the pursuit of perfectionist self-cultivation in the art of living.”²³ In a number of site-specific projects she has attempted to improve both the environment and the living quality of the people who live there. She has had what Shusterman calls “a meliorist goal of making things better (...) (by) opening thought and life to new and promising options.”²⁴

Marit Benthe Norheim’s art works show how she uses the female body both in small and large scale to express fundamental human attitudes, experiences, feelings and dreams. She is in agreement with Mark Rothko, when he wrote in connection with the decoration of a chapel in Houston that he was interested only in expressing “basic human emotions.”²⁵

The *Lady of the Sea* (2001) in Sæby and the *Rat Maiden* (2006) in Skien demonstrate this with all desirable clarity. They both visualize - on a very large scale - two of the most mysterious and ambiguous figures in Henrik Ibsen’s drama. She has modelled both of these monumental works and the majority of her other pieces by hand in cement. She manages to reshape and transform the cement in an unusual way so that it can express the humanity, the life-giving processes and the protection against destructive forces, which she has been concerned with interpreting. Through her female figures she visualizes her conception of the body which is the core in somaesthetics because she, as Shusterman expresses it, “treats the body not only as an object of aesthetic value and creation, but also as a crucial sensory medium for enhancing our dealings with all other aesthetic objects and also with matters not standardly aesthetic”²⁶ particularly the basic existential questions.

These concepts are interpreted in sculptural project in the Sports and Cultural Center in Skien, Norway, she installed a male and a female figure who stand easily and elegantly on their heads. They are both covered in medals. Through this work, Marit Benthe Norheim wanted to emphasise the positive aspects of our life. Or as she expresses it:

“The artwork must be positive, just like the building, which includes both sports and health, both the traditional and the new.”²⁷

An important element in somaesthetics is what Shusterman calls “to break the hold of object fetishism in contemporary art, aesthetics and culture.” He calls this characteristic the “exaggerated sense of art’s demarcation from the rest of life and its autonomy from wider social and political forces that in fact penetrate even into the very forms of artistic expression.”²⁸

To intensify the dialogue between art, the surroundings and people, Marit Benthe Norheim has created five moveable sculptures. With her eagle eyes she has found five shabby caravans. With a sure and sensitive hand she has transformed them into mobile sculptures of great strength and originality. The caravans are shaped externally like monumental female figures modelled in bright white concrete. They are titled *Five Camping Women* (figure 3) and are called *The Refugee*, *Maria Pro-*

tector/*Virgin Mary*, *The Bride*, *The Siren* and *Camping Mama*. Inside the caravans there are sculptures, reliefs and photographs and music, which is partly edited, partly created by the renowned composer Geir Johnson. The music intensifies and makes immediate the themes represented by the Camping women. Thus, they appeal to sight, hearing, thought and fantasy and are vibrantly embodied art.



Figure 3. Marit Benthe Norheim's five camping women. Photograph by Niels Fabaek.



Figure 4. From left to right, the Bride, the Refugee, and the Camping Mama. Photograph courtesy of Marit Benthe Norheim, Claus Ørntoft.

The first *Camping Woman* is representing *Maria the Protector*. Marit Benthe Norheim has formed her as a symbol of modern humanity's need for mercy, love and protection, because it exists in a one-dimensional and individualistic world. Geir Johnson has interpreted the tension between the human and the divine aspect in *Maria the Protector* in his personal adaptation of Gregorio Allegri's work of the 1630's, *Miserere Mei, Deus*. In the interiors of the *Camping Woman* there are also sculptures such as the *dead Jesus*, who visualizes God's love for humanity. The vocal interpretation presented is by the famous Trio Mediaeval.

Another example is the *Camping Woman* representing *The Refugee*, which functions as a symbol of the fate of our immigrants. (figure 4) She bends forward lithely and gazes - with both bravery and fear - into the foreign world that she has been forced to flee to. Inside the caravan, 400 children and refugee women from Stavanger created porcelain mosaics with motifs expressing longing and loss. Geir Johnson has composed music for voice and electronic sounds that fills the interior of the caravan, the words chosen from the poetry of the famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish who, in his poem, *State of Siege* (2002), expressed both the pain and fear that are a part of daily life for the refugee. However, Darwish also points out the "the malady of hope is incurable." Moreover, even though the refugees must live an uncertain existence, they are "eternity's guests." The text is presented in both English and Norwegian, read by actress Tora Augestad.

The third *Camping Women*, *The Bride* radiates eroticism, but all the wedding pictures inside the caravan show the multiplicity of views of marriage and point in many places indirectly at the often difficult circumstances that a bride has to live under. The fourth *Camping Woman*, *The Siren* is a contemporary interpretation of the seductive siren from Greek mythology, who lures seaman towards shipwreck. This is also how seduction often happens today.

The inner space of the caravan is covered with handprints - without a doubt impressions left from the many people she has met, loved, kept or left. Geir Johnson has composed the music - which is sung by the famous Norwegian soprano Siri Torjesen - but it is constantly interrupted by her banal, often scolding remarks such as "Why aren't you coming, the coffee is getting cold." The seductive enchantment is broken and dissipated by the trivialities of the everyday. The *Camping Mama* is large and caring, but also symbolizes the parochial, almost suffocating atmosphere that the bourgeois life can hold.

With the *Camping Women*, a different artistic experience has flooded into the cityscape and into nature. They appeal not only to sight, hearing, feelings and imagination - but also sharpen political awareness and ethical thinking. Added to this is the fact that the *Camping Women* do not remain in one fixed place, but include a journey, a flow and a change. They can be moved to new town spaces in different combinations and create new visual dialogues with their surroundings and stimulate viewers in different and unexpected ways. The *Camping Women* show that Marit Benthe Norheim works with forms, which are deeply anchored in the condition, that human understanding of the world occurs through the body

and the senses. Her sculptures encompass an invitation to enter into a direct and sensory relationship with them.

The *Camping Women* frame the places where they are situated and give them new meaning. They invite the viewer to experience something new and unexpected, emphasize directions of movement in the environment and create new points of view. With her five *Camping Women*, Marit Benthe Norheim shows that art contains an unusual sensory experience by communicating aspects of our inner and outer reality that we often overlook and may not even be aware of.

The inclusion of the music in the five caravans creates a more intense experiential whole, because the various compositions are carefully matched to the spaces that the *Camping Women* have conquered. In the *Camping Women* Norheim has succeeded in realizing her artistic endeavours, which she has expressed as follows: “I have always been fascinated by art which has a will to communicate and in one way or another functions as a kind of door opener”

The *Life-boats* is her next very unexpected and interactive project. It will be integrated into a European framework in a very impressive way. She is working on creating three sculptures in cement, which will become functioning boats, shaped as monumental female figures. They will be 12m in length. The project is called *My ship is loaded with;* 1. *Longing*- the young one, entering into the world. 2. *Life* - in the middle of life and fertilized. 3. *Memories* - the ageing or the dead. The first piece has already been completed in a very convincing way. Marit Benthe Norheim wants the sailing sculptures to become “floating cultural houses” and be able to “sail on the European canals, which naturally lead the ships through the heart of the European cities that are built up around the old waterways.”

The three Danish visual artists Bjørnstjerne Christiansen, Jakob Fenger and Rasmus Nielsen formed a project group in 1993 that they called SUPERFLEX. And they have already gained international recognition for their projects, which are based on new technology but also function on a conceptual level and use social processes and networking as their working material. Their solo exhibitions include Basel Kunsthalle, Mori Museum in Tokyo and in Los Angeles, London, Porto Alegre, Brazil and Bangkok. Their projects are represented in MoMA, New York, Queensland Art Gallery, Jumex collection, Mexico as well as other museums and art collections. They were all educated at the Royal Danish Academy of Art. They describe their most important aim with their often site-specific projects as follows:

“We are three members of SUPERFLEX and are joined by various international collaborators on individual projects. Since 1993, we have worked on a series of initiatives involving issues such as energy production in developing countries, Internet television studios for specific neighborhoods and communities and brand name copy production in South East Asia. Though very different, all these projects relate closely to questions of power relations and democracy. We are interested in using our position as artists to explore the contribution that the field of art can make to social, political and economic change. At a time of extreme disillusion with the current representa-

tive system and hysteria around immigration and security, it is our suggestion that some possible new ways of thinking and acting can be found through the activity of art and artists.” There are some clear parallels between the aims of SUPERFLEX and one of the keywords in Shusterman’s original development of pragmatism. This deals with what he calls “community” which he characterizes as “an indispensable medium for the pursuit of better beliefs, knowledge, and even for the realization of meaning through language and the arts.” He is convinced that “community is not only a cognitive theme in pragmatism but an aesthetic, ethical, and political one, and it contributes to pragmatism’s fundamentally democratic orientation. Pragmatists have offered cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic arguments for democracy.”²⁹

SUPERFLEX describe their projects as tools that invite people to take part in the creation of their experimental models which often are aimed at changing the economic and cultural conditions in various societies, both in the East and in the West. Shusterman also emphasizes the active, creative elements in the experience of art. It is never a passive purposeless affair of disembodied contemplation. It always involves what he call an “active somatic engagement.”

Researchers like Troels Degn Johansen and Åsa Nacking have included SUPERFLEX projects under the heading of relational art.³⁰ This art form was discussed by Nicola Bourriaud in 1998 in his book *Esthétique Relationnelle (Relational Aesthetics, 2002)*. His definition of relational art is a description of what is precisely the core element of SUPERFLEX’s projects. He describes this art form as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space. This type of art is, according to Åsa Nacking, also called “socializing art” because it comprises elements of interactivity and because “its most noticeable characteristic is its socializing effect. This is a type of art that wants to bring people together and to increase understanding for each other and for our own situation.” Bourriaud indicates that artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Carsten Höller are prominent examples of artists who work with relational art.³¹ It is precisely these artists that Shusterman highlights in his writings. According to him it is “obvious that art is an essentially relational enterprise, especially due to its fundamentally communicative dimension.” In an interview by Aude Launay on Biological Aesthetics he tells us, that he admires “some European artists of such “relational orientation” e.g. Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Philippe Parreno. He met them at an Art and Experience event in Venice (2004) organized by the Italian art critic Maurizio Bartolotti. But even if Shusterman has clear sympathies with their artistic and social aims, his “aesthetic theory does not regard them as essentially superior to other ways of art making.” His “theoretical position is more pluralistic. There are many ways that art can express its inescapably relational condition and our essentially social existence.”³¹ Höller had a great “interest in Pragmatist Aesthetics’ themes of full bodied, participatory aesthetic experience and the blurring of the established oppositions between life and art, the aesthetic and the ethical, knowledge and amusement.” That is why he asked Shusterman in 1996 to write the text for the provocative *House of Pigs and People* he created together with Rosemarie Trockel for Documenta X in 1997.³²

SUPERFLEX say that they have, “since 1996 (...), collaborated with European and African engineers to construct a simple biogas unit that can produce sufficient gas for the cooking and lighting needs for a family living in rural areas in the Global South. In August 1997, SUPERFLEX installed and tested the first Supergas biogas system running on organic materials, such as human and animal feces. The experiment was carried out at a small farm in central Tanzania, in cooperation with the African organization SURUDE (Sustainable Rural Development). The biogas plant produces approx. 3-4 cubic metres of gas per day from the dung from 2-3 cattle – enough for a family of 8-10 members for cooking purposes and to run one gas lamp in the evening. A new version of the Supergas system, using hard water containers, was installed in 2002 at The Land in Chiang Mai. (figure 5) The Land was founded in 1998 by Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lerdchaiprasert. It is a collaborative educational-ecological project known also as The Land Foundation, located in the northern part of Thailand, near the village of Sampathong, not far from Chiang Mai. The project combines contemporary art interventions and traditional agricultural values; the six-hectares of land are intended to be cultivated as an open space or community free from ownership, and residents and artists are welcomed to use a plot of land as a laboratory for development, cultivating rice, building sustainable houses, or channeling solar power. Tiravanija is also part of a collective alternative space located in Bangkok, where he maintains his primary residence and studio.”³³



Figure 5. The SUPERFLEX's Supergas Biogas System. Photograph provided by the artists of the The Land Foundation.

Conclusion

Rirkrit Tiravanija's, Marit Benthe Norheim's and SUPERFLEX's works visualize – as we have seen – some of the more important elements in Shusterman's somaesthetics, particularly with regard to embodied creation and perception, the interactive dialogue with the viewer and the surroundings and the close connection between art and experience. Their works also demonstrate that art can promote somatic consciousness and awareness, have a social or cultural goal or meet limit-experiences.

But it is precisely Shusterman's somaesthetics, which has also revealed new aspects of the works of the artists discussed here. This aesthetics has thus shown that it can provide artists, in a precise and intense way, with a new and stimulating understanding of the body's role in the arts as a resource for working on the problems of creating and interpreting art and improving the quality of our life and society.

The renowned Chinese artist Pan Gongkai knows that body consciousness plays an important role in contemporary Chinese painting and should have a more central place in Western art and aesthetics.

Shusterman also emphasizes that in the projects created by Pan Gongkai "West and East coexist in active harmony and moving beauty, without an isolating separation, but also without coercive fusion."³⁴ This viewpoint has also been a core element of Shusterman's somaesthetics because art and aesthetics are able to create reconciliation in a society where religious and political opinions create division. He has described this perception as follows:

"If it were indeed possible, aesthetics could really be a wonderful bridge between cultures, even warring ones. But if aesthetics cannot be ultimately separated from a culture's underlying religious attitudes, then it may not be feasible to realize this possibility in our imperfect world until we also work not only through but beyond aesthetics to transform our cultures and religious attitudes in the direction of deeper, more open-minded understanding."³⁵

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